Russia in the 2008 International Arena

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The August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia highlighted two key aspects of Russian foreign policy: Moscow's political goals in the former Soviet space and the parameters for the achievement of these goals; and the broader context – how post-Soviet Russia sees itself in the international arena, particularly its relations with the Western alliance. The following essay examines these two issues.

This coming December will mark seventeen years since the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Even now it is still impossible to examine Russia's external behavior since that time without mentioning the unrealistic expectations of the leaders of first the Soviet Union and then Russia concerning the international theater in the years preceding and immediately following the collapse. Gorbachev, his successor Yeltsin, and Yeltsin's circle of advisors based their foreign policy on premises that quickly proved entirely mistaken. Their idea was that once nuclear strategic parity between Russia and the United States was achieved and maintained, Russia's international status as an equal to the US would be guaranteed, even in an era without global confrontation. The Strategic Arms Treaty-1 (START-1), signed days after the unsuccessful August 1991 coup d'état in the Kremlin – four months before the Soviet Union collapsed – re-codified the strategic parity between the two superpowers, even after a mutual deep cut in their respective stockpiles of nuclear weapons. In this vein, Kozyrev, Yeltsin's foreign minister until early 1996, promulgated a vision of Russia and the US constituting the joint leaders of the new world order.[1]

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He was greatly mistaken. Following the Soviet collapse, the Russians woke up to find themselves in a completely different international reality. Although Russia remained "the only country in the world capable of destroying the US,"[2] when all the other power indicators were factored in, Russia was relegated to fourth or fifth place among global power players, and certainly below the US, the European Union (EU), and China. Thus, in the absence of any significant likelihood of a global military confrontation, and due also to the downward spiral of the Russian economy (to a GDP total of $250 billion in the early 1990s),[3] Russia's claim to be a great power seemed rather pathetic.

Russian leaders quickly grasped that the international reality departed from what the founding fathers of post-Soviet Russia had envisioned. The ideologue of the revised evaluation was Yevgeny Primakov, who replaced Kozyrev as foreign minister in 1996. In his memoirs, he explains that before he assumed his position, Moscow had already accepted the idea that Russia's relations with the US would resemble the model of US relations with Germany and Japan following World War II, when these defeated nations became Washington's junior allies. According to this concept, Russia would become a US international ally of secondary importance. In Primakov's view, such a partnership between Russia and the West was totally unacceptable,[4] and Russian foreign policy became more assertive under his leadership. While the new way of thinking recognized that Russian interests to a great degree coincided with those of the US, it also held that there were areas in which the interests of the two countries diverged significantly.[5]

Over the past seventeen years the new direction in Russia's foreign relations has led to a tendency to interpret Russia's foreign policy as a contest between two conflicting trends vis-à-vis the international arena. The theory was that following the elimination of the totalitarian Communist system, Russia was busy searching for its new identity as a nation and hesitated "between East and West."[6] The aggressive Russian response to the Georgian offensive in South Ossetia gave rise to a sharp public debate on the question of whether Russia and the West were on the verge of a new Cold War.

It is now increasingly apparent that the concept of Russian policy as vacillating between opposing orientations is flawed. To some degree, this view is itself a remnant of an interpretive perspective from the Cold

War – it smacks of concern about threats that are no longer real – and reflects a lack of understanding of the actual circumstances. Indeed, most of the Russian people do not regard Russia as an integral part of the West, and have neither any natural feeling of belonging to "the family of Western peoples" nor any aspiration to be included in it.[7] The feeling of alienation and suspicion towards "the West," especially the US and its intentions, has always been common among Russians and is still so today. Despite the fact that the Euro-Atlantic alliance has made several generous gestures towards Russia (for example, inclusion in the G-8; the cooperation agreement between Russia and NATO; inclusion in the Quartet; financial assistance, albeit considered by the Russians to be inadequate; and others), it has never regarded Russia as a prodigal son. For understandable reasons, full Russian membership in NATO and the EU is not under consideration for the foreseeable future, and the feeling of alienation is probably mutual.

It is possible to attempt to understand the given situation from a several hundred years' historical perspective, when Russia was doubly alienated from Western Europe, beginning with the split between the Catholic and Orthodox churches and exacerbated by the Tatar-Mongolian conquest of Russia from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries. A psychoanalytically oriented theory, which focuses on the humiliated Russian ego of a great nation that was victorious in World War II but defeated in the second half of the twentieth century by its major rival, the US, is admissible as well.

There is of course a great deal of truth in these analyses, but it is also important to understand what happened after the collapse of the Soviet Union and grasp Russia's disappointment *in the current generation* following the brief episode of a real though perhaps bizarre attempt to integrate into the Western camp. The new guiding principles of Russian behavior in international affairs were established against this background, and have already been in operation for over a decade. In fact, they constitute the only real change in international strategic doctrine in Moscow since 1991. Obviously the years have on occasion seen other nuances and behavior (for example, Putin's consent to a "temporary American military presence" in Central

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Asia, under the assumption that the battle against terrorism originating in Afghanistan is also a significant Russian interest). However, the paradigm established five years after the disappearance of the Soviet Union has remained the cornerstone of the official Russian view of the external world to this day. Putin has never questioned the validity of the 1996 assumptions. It is an irony of fate that as Russia's economic situation improved dramatically in the current decade, what perhaps appeared to be somewhat pathetic behavior in the second half of the preceding decade suddenly appears possible, and even effective, with Putin at the helm.

Overall, then, starting in the second half of the 1990s, the prevailing view among top Russian international policymakers never denied the existence of a defined area of common and even identical interests and values among Russia and the West, such as the struggle against international terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and never included a vision of Russia as a country hostile to the Western alliance. However, since Russia does not belong to this camp, it has developed a feeling of severe unease with respect to the dominance of the US and its allies in the global theater. This is based on the belief that in a number of regions, especially in the sphere of the independent states that belonged to the former Soviet Union, Western goals and the Russian interest diverge significantly.

Russia and the Territories of the Former Soviet Union

Even though the collapse of the Soviet empire was an enormous blow to the Russian national ego, today it is hard to find any significant longing among the Russian political class for "yesteryear's days of glory," when Moscow's hegemony stretched from the Elbe River in Germany to Bulgaria in southern Europe. Those who still dream of renewing Russia's imperial ownership of this region probably number a few marginal elements. On the other hand, non-acceptance of the loss of a solid governing grip on the western republics of the Soviet Union (particularly Ukraine), the Caucasus, and in Central Asia is quite intense and has not ebbed at all. The Russians still feel the loss of these territories as a national disaster of the highest order and have never accepted it, either emotionally or intellectually. Putin once said that he regarded this development as a disaster of historic proportions,

and referred to it as a "catastrophe" (the Russian word is a synonym for "holocaust").[8] Indeed, the dissolution of the Soviet Union was far from peaceful: it included five civil wars (in Moldova, two in Georgia, between the Armenians and the Azeris, and in Tajikistan). One hundred thousand people were killed, a half million wounded, and millions rendered homeless.[9]

At every opportunity Russia repeats explicitly that the eleven republics of the former Soviet Union (Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) are of the highest priority in its national interest. The Baltic countries, which are not members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), are not included on this list, at least not openly.[10] In any event, where political behavior is concerned, Moscow's attitude to the newly independent republics is quite pragmatic in the sense of refraining from the pursuit of unrealistic goals. Even in the recent war with Georgia over control of South Ossetia, the Russians were adept at exploiting the miscalculated and unwise measure taken by the president of Georgia; they unleashed a military offensive and recognized the independence of the region, but at the same time avoided the occupation of the capital city of Tbilisi and extensive Georgian territories. Such an occupation was undoubtedly within their grasp, but would have constituted a crossing of all international red lines in military and political terms. Indeed, reconstituting a united federation along the lines of the Soviet Union is not an operative goal of the Kremlin, and has not been one since the end of the Soviet empire.

At the same time, the assumption among Moscow policymakers has always been that due to the relatively small size of the newly independent republics and their territorial proximity to the Russian giant, they will not have many political and economic options, and consequently a judicious and calculated carrot-and-stick policy will force their return to the Russian sphere of influence. In this manner, Russia will be able to continue its political, military, and economic hegemony in the former Soviet territories. This obviously presumes that realistic alternatives and offers presented to them by outside parties – offers that Russia regards as aimed at preventing these countries from returning to its embrace – can be eclipsed. Thus since the Soviet Union was liquidated, Russia has consistently acted as best it could to promote its regional

interests and thwart courtship of the newly independent countries by Western powers, particularly the US.

Thus, the area of the former Soviet Union has now become the main point of friction between Russian interests and American goals. For Russia, the proposed plans for Ukraine and Georgia to join NATO are akin to waving a red flag in front of a bull. In official documents, Moscow defines its interests in clear and unmistakable language: preservation of political stability and prevention of takeovers by Islamic jihadist groups, close relations with Russian ethnic populations in the region (numbering an estimated 19 million), and important economic and military interests. To this day Russian military experts regard the old Soviet border as the Russian security perimeter, which they believe justifies continued military deployment of Russian forces in these countries (as of 2008, in the area between the Russian border and the old Soviet border, Russia maintains over ten military installations and bases, tens of thousands of soldiers, and an additional 20,000 technicians[11]). In his speech before the annual forum of Russian diplomats in July 2004, Putin stressed the supreme importance to Russia of the former Soviet territories, and stipulated that Russia had every right to intervene in these regions and to employ all the means at its disposal, including military force, for the purposes of settling disputes, preserving stability, and defending Russian citizens residing there.[12]

In general, Russia's behavior with regard to this area is based on two guiding principles. The first is "integration" (Moscow deliberately refrains from using the terms "reintegration" and "return of the territories to their owners," due to their imperialistic connotations). Like its predecessors, "The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation" published last July makes clear that any political orientation of the new countries other than a joint effort to continue their rapprochement with Russia, the mother country, is unacceptable. At the same time, the document avoids any mention or debunking of other options.

The second guiding principle is international legitimacy. From the very beginning, Russian leaders have striven consistently to attain external legitimacy, even if only nominal, for every strategic measure taken to defend their interests in these regions. The need for recognition by the international community has led Russia to employ a variety of operational methods. In the first days of Yeltsin's presidency, there may

have been those in Moscow who believed that the West would allow Russia a free hand in its policy towards Central Asia and the Caucasus, because Russia constitutes Europe's defensive wall against extremist Islam and the political instability originating from these regions.[13] Today, it is clear that Russia has no chance of obtaining a blank check on these matters. In at least one case, however, that of supervising the ceasefire in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Moscow succeeded in obtaining international recognition of its leading status: the international peacekeeping force in Azerbaijan is for all intents and purposes a Russian military unit operating under the auspices of the UN, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the Minsk Group. The international community recognized that the Russian national interest in this matter was quite strong, and that Russia would therefore be the most effective party in accomplishing the mission.

Nevertheless, multilateral and bilateral agreements with the independent countries have thus far served as the main basis for Russia's leading status in this theater, and have provided various forms of legitimacy for its intervention in these regions. For example, it can be asked why Russia attaches such great importance in its official documents to the CIS (it is mentioned over ten times in the new "Concept"), when the CIS has proven to be a loose multilateral body and a completely ineffective tool for enforcing Russian hegemony over the eleven former Soviet republics. However, since the CIS was formed in 1991, it was designed above all to provide an alternative legal basis for the Soviet structure – for a continuance of Russia's military and economic presence and its leading status in these countries. In Russian eyes, therefore, in the absence of any other document signed by the eleven new countries, the CIS treaty constitutes a legitimate basic and legal document. In addition, in order to exert its military and economic influence in certain CIS member countries more effectively, Moscow uses two other multilateral organizations: the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which coordinates joint military policy between Russia and Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Armenia, and Belarus; and the Eurasian Economic Commonwealth (EEC), which promotes economic integration between the six member countries and Russia. Joining this web of multilateral agreements are bilateral agreements and treaties with governments of individual countries

(such as the treaty with Kazakhstan on Russia's use of nuclear missile testing and outer space launching facilities in Baikonur and the treaty with Ukraine on the Russian fleet's use of the naval base in Sebastopol in the Crimea).

While officially Russia defines the actual dangers to this area as international terrorism and extremist Islam (while the drug trafficking route from Afghanistan and illegal immigration might join the list), the threats not spelled out in the Russian documents are those stemming from foreign influences and attempts by outside parties at economic, political, and military penetration of the new countries. In the early years of Yeltsin's presidency, attention focused on Turkey, which was believed to be trying to carve out a status for itself among the Turkish-speaking peoples in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Very quickly, however, it became clear that this "threat" was not a serious one. For a while, it also seemed that Iran might try to export the Islamic Revolution to the Muslim republics, but Moscow later saw that Iran was willing to cooperate in achieving a ceasefire and political agreement to end the civil war and stabilize the situation in Tajikistan.

In Russia's eyes, two main factors still pose a threat to Russia's hegemony in the bordering territories: China (especially in Central Asia) and the Western alliance (in the entire area, but particularly in the Western republics and above all Ukraine and Georgia). Indeed, China shows great interest in Central Asian countries, primarily as a source of energy, but also because the volume of its foreign trade and its diplomatic relations with them are highly significant. The annual volume of China's foreign aid to these countries amounts to about $1 billion. Nonetheless, at least as of now, there are no signs that China plans any attempt to push Russia out of this region.[14] Thus as Russia sees the challenge posed by the US and NATO to its influence in the area, while realizing that it is incapable of dealing alone with all the political dynamics there, Moscow has chosen to collaborate with Beijing in order to preserve stability in the region. The formation of the Shanghai Cooperative Organization (SCO) in 2001, whose members currently include Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan (based on the Shanghai Five from 1996) was designed to enable Russia and China, the two regional powers, to set the regional agenda and act jointly to block Western involvement, which was already

visible at that time. Over the past three years, Russian policy has indeed registered a number of significant achievements in Central Asia: the withdrawal of American forces stationed in Uzbekistan under pressure from the SCO, and the return of Uzbekistan to Mother Russia's fold, following several years of hesitation between East and West.

The situation in the western republics is more complex. Four countries aspire to various degrees of separation from Russian control: Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova (GUAM). Russia possesses effective means of influencing them, since all of them suffer from serious "birth defects" in the form of significant cracks in their national unity (Ukraine suffers from a deep split between the ethnically Russian population and the Ukrainian population that underwent Russification on one side and the nationalistic Ukrainian majority, while Georgia has two rebellious minorities in its territory – the Abkhazis and South Ossetians). Russia is capable of exploiting these complexities, as it did in this past summer's Russia-Georgia conflict. Russia does not hesitate to use all the means at its disposal, military force included, to protect what it regards as its interests. Nevertheless, even though the Kremlin believes in the effectiveness of constant pressure on the former Soviet Union countries, it behaves more cautiously towards the republics in the western territories because it is aware of the strong interest in these areas by the Euro-Atlantic bloc countries. The success of the "colored revolutions," in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004-2005), as well as the possibility of the future inclusion of these two countries in NATO, constitutes a severe and troublesome headache for Russia, which consistently tries to intervene in their internal affairs in order to thwart these developments. Yet since this tireless activity by Moscow has to date not yielded a significant result, it can be assumed that Russia is well aware of its political limitations in blocking Western influences. Actually, the parameters of Moscow's military action in the Russia-Georgia war illustrate the pains taken by Russian leaders not to overstep accepted bounds, beyond which they would enter an irreversible conflict with the Western alliance.

Russia and the Western Alliance: The Balance of Power

Russia is now an undisputed superpower in the energy sector. It has huge reserves of hydrocarbons, and the world's largest natural gas

reserves (33 percent of global gas reserves are on Russian territory; 55 percent, if the reserves of the nearby republics are included). Russia currently provides 40 percent of the natural gas consumed in Eastern and Western Europe, and this proportion is expected to reach 75 percent in twenty years.[15] Russia was the leading crude oil producer in 2006, even though it is only eighth in global crude oil reserves. The Russian treasury's daily revenue from energy sales was estimated in 2007 at $530 million, amounting to nearly $200 billion (in 2007 dollar values) for the year.[16] No other sector of the Russian economy is even close to generating this level of revenue in foreign currency. Nevertheless, a comparative analysis of the Russian economy with respect to the other giant national economies shows that the Russian economy is fairly small. Russia's GDP totaled about $1.42 trillion in 2007, approximately half the size of Great Britain's $2.84 trillion and France's $2.68 trillion, a little more than one third of Germany's $3.43 trillion, and still significantly smaller than Italy's $2.22 trillion.[17] By this calculation, the combined GDP of the US and the EU countries (about $30 trillion) dwarfs the Russian economy, where the GDP is less than 5 percent of the Western total,[18] not to mention that Russia has already trailed far behind China ($3.94 trillion) for a number of years, and even more so, Japan ($4.96 trillion).[19]

Not surprisingly, the picture changes slightly with regard to military power. Since 1972, strategic parity between the Soviet Union (and now Russia) and the US has been recognized by the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT-1). In 2008, Russia's strategic offensive arsenal contained 3,113 warheads,[20] slightly less than the American arsenal, and is close to the permitted level determined by START-1 in 1991. The 2002 Strategic Offensive (weapons) Reduction Treaty (SORT), which deals with the number of strategic missiles that can be operationally deployed and not with the size of the nuclear arsenals maintained by the two sides, also carefully maintained the principle of equality between the two powers. Ostensibly, therefore, Russia had reason to be satisfied with its status as the world's second largest nuclear power.

Nonetheless, indications are that Russia is quite disturbed by what it regards as an unstable balance of power. Russian policymakers are aware of the huge financial resources at the disposal of the US, which could enable the latter to create a strategic gap that would leave Moscow

behind vis-à-vis the pace and extent of American military power buildup. In fact, American defense spending totaled $480 billion in 2008, i.e., almost fifteen times the $35 billion Russian defense budget.[21] Senior Russian officials in the foreign policy and defense establishments have admitted more than once that one of Moscow's main considerations in entering into negotiations and eventually signing a nuclear arms control treaty was above all the desire to prevent a renewal of the nuclear arms race, in which Russia would again be liable to find itself with capabilities inferior to those of the US, and even more so to bind the Americans to a commitment to limit the construction of their strategic capability.[22]

This perspective currently poses two main problems for Russian leaders. The first is that the nuclear weapons control regime, whose cornerstones are the START-1 and SORT treaties, will soon expire: START-1 ends at the end of 2009, and SORT in 2012. In order to establish a follow-up regime, it will be necessary to enter bilateral negotiations between the two powers, and Moscow is by no means sure that Washington has any interest in doing so. After all, the outgoing Bush administration entered the White House seeing no need to negotiate additional strategic weapons control agreements with Moscow. Moreover, as far as is known, the Russian nuclear arsenal is aging rapidly and will soon be out of date.

The second problem is Russian dissatisfaction with the dynamics of the emerging military situation in Europe following the withdrawal of Russian forces from Germany and the other East European countries. On a number of occasions, key Russian leaders have complained that before Soviet/Russian forces were actually withdrawn in the early 1990s, a number of prominent Western leaders promised that NATO had no intention of exploiting the advantages generated by Russia's military evacuation of Central and Eastern Europe.[23] In spite of this, Russia now finds itself in a new military situation, in which all of its former satellites, the former Warsaw Pact countries, are included in NATO. NATO planes patrol the airspace of the Baltic countries and US soldiers are slated to be stationed in Romania and Bulgaria for the foreseeable future, not to mention the planned stationing of anti-missile batteries in Poland and anti-missile radar in the Czech Republic. The moratorium proclaimed last December by Russia on the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE) reflected on the one hand the Russian

assessment that this treaty is antiquated and anachronistic, based on the former Soviet reality and not the new European structure that emerged after its collapse. The moratorium is also an attempt (whose success remains to be seen) to expedite the beginning of renewed negotiations for a comprehensive revision of the balance of conventional forces in Europe.

Nonetheless, Moscow is not purely on the defensive where military buildup is concerned. The difficult economic situation and political weakness that characterized the first decade following the disappearance of the Soviet empire masked the imperialistic impulses and ambitions that have consistently characterized Russian leaders, while causing an almost total halt in the process of building Russia's conventional and strategic power. In those lean years, all branches of the Russian military refrained from making new procurement orders for weapons, and the defense industries cut their production volume to about 10 percent of capacity.[24] This changed with the reversal in Russia's economy. During Putin's administration (and particularly during his second term as president) when huge reserves of petro-rubles began to accumulate, Moscow regained its confidence. It was able to return Russia to the route of military buildup and development. In 2007, Putin approved a $200 billion seven-year plan to modernize strategic and conventional forces, including the construction of five aircraft carriers.[25] The Russian air force renewed the routine flights that it had conducted during the Cold War, when Soviet strategic bombers patrolled the oceans, and talk began of renewing the Russian fleet's presence in the Mediterranean and the full use of the base at Tartus in Syria.[26] Thus in recent years, Russia has indeed been working hard at flexing its military muscle in accordance with its self-image as a great power intent on remaining one. This occurs in conjunction with an ongoing monitoring of the rapid strengthening of American military force, especially in order to ensure that Russia maintains its status as a military and political factor to be reckoned with. That is precisely the state in which Russia would like to find itself vis-à-vis the next American administration on issues such as new nuclear arms control agreements and the future of regions in which Russia believes it has essential interests, not only in the former Soviet Union but also in other not too distant regions.

A New Architecture of International Relations

All aspects of diplomatic relations with Western countries, not just their military dimensions, are currently extremely worrisome to Moscow policymakers. From an economic standpoint, over half of Russia's foreign trade is with the EU.[27] When the Partnership and Cooperation Treaty (PCA) was signed in 1997, a senior Russian official described it as no less important than the START-1 treaty. For Moscow, the main problem in this area is the political expansion and strengthening of the Euro-Atlantic military alliance to the west of Russia, led by the US. This alliance is currently much stronger in all aspects than it ever was during the Cold War. For its part, NATO leadership, which is well aware of the concern in Russians caused by the two rounds of expansion of the alliance agreement and the inclusion of the new countries in the organization (in 1997 and 2002), initiated a number of measures designed to assuage Russian concerns. A joint council was set up first in 1997 and then in 2002 for coordination and cooperation between NATO and Russia, called the NATO Russia Council (NRC), although in practice the existence of the NRC only slightly relieved the Russian feeling of estrangement.

As mentioned, not long after the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia recognized that it was unrealistic to expect its full inclusion in the Western alliance as an organic partner, and that it would have to forge an independent path in the international arena. In recent years, a new term in the Russian political lexicon has been used to refer to Russia: "sovereign democracy." With regard to foreign policy, this concept distinguishes between Russia and other European countries, which Russia regards as subordinate to the US to some degree, rather than being completely independent.[28] This is a key point in understanding the current Russian concept of the external world. Moscow feels ill at ease with the existing Western military and political superiority. Furthermore, surprising as it may be, the Russian leadership feels that while the Cold War is over, Western containment towards Russia has not ended. Where Russia is concerned, the US and NATO continue to see the world in terms of inter-bloc politics, and regard Russia as foreign to them for all intents and purposes.[29] This is the root of Russia's crude opposition to any use of force by the US and its allies anywhere in the world without the official authorization of the UN Security Council. The

determined rejection of the Bush administration's use of force against Saddam Hussein in 2003 and of possible American (and Israeli, for that matter) military action to block the Iranian nuclear project, stems from this attitude. Indeed, seventeen years have passed since the end of the Cold War, and Russia still refuses to accept the leading role of the West in the global arena.

This explains why for over a decade the guiding principle of Russia's external policy has been to seek checks and balances to Western hegemony and align itself with international parties that create a counterweight to Western power. During Putin's regime, however, the drive has become prominent and consistent, particularly following the revolution in the energy market at the beginning of the current decade. Russia now pins its hopes on what it sees as two international developments capable of challenging Western dominance in the foreseeable future. One is the "Troika" – Russia's establishment of a joint political bloc with India and China. In addition, the BRIC countries – Brazil, Russia, India, and China – are all non-Western and possess the world's fastest growing economies. This Russian mode of thinking is reflected in the concept of a "new architecture of international relations" surfacing recently among foreign policy circles in Moscow and in official Russian documents. This perspective is also reflected in the somewhat bizarre proposal submitted to NATO last July by Russia calling for an overhauling of the "outdated" joint European security system, and its replacement by a new multilateral security system stretching "from Vancouver to Vladivostok."[30] The proposal is reminiscent of propagandistic Soviet proposals during the Cold War calling for a reorganization of the European security system.

In the course of time, this line of thinking may well prove an exercise in self-deception. Sino-Russian relations, for example, are currently quite good, particularly after both countries settled the border disputes between them, but this partnership is liable to prove unstable in the medium and long terms, given the accelerating growth of China's power and the existence of a number of potential conflicts, currently dormant, between the two countries (such as those relating to Central Asia and the Russian Far East). It is also not clear to what degree Russia can rely on friendly relations between India and China in the context of tripartite cooperation against the West. In any case, there is no certainty

that any substance exists in coordination of anti-American policy among the BRIC countries. This can also prove to be a false maxim.

Thus on the threshold of the second decade of the twenty-first century, Russia is severely frustrated by the new world order that emerged after it lost its imperial status and the assets derived from that status. The vision of joint hegemony with the US proved illusory, the possibility of organic merging with the Western peoples is problematic in the current situation, and Russia has no other natural allies in the international arena. For this reason, Russia has become a country dissatisfied with its situation, and is confused about its real place in the family of nations.

Russia in the Middle East

The end of the Cold War reduced somewhat the strategic importance of the Mediterranean and what is called in Russia the "Near East." Nevertheless, for two key reasons the region has not significantly declined on the Russian scale of priorities. The first reason is its geographical proximity to the Russian border and its neighboring regions. The second reason is that due to the Persian Gulf's wealth and business importance, new economic opportunities have opened up to post-Soviet Russia. Even though Russia's interests in this area do not completely coincide with those of the Western countries, there is a wide sphere of common goals. In contrast to the Soviet Union, which for a number of decades during the Cold War had a special interest in undermining the existing political stability, particularly in countries with pro-Western regimes, the basic Russian interest today is to promote regional stability. Russia has even become a status quo power in the Middle East. The supreme priority of preserving stability in the region was clear already in the first post-Soviet years, and has remained Russia's goal since. As a country itself composed of hundreds of ethnic groups and bordered to the south and southwest by a large variety of ethnic populations and religions, Russia feels threatened by any demonstration of national tension or religious extremism. The fear is that instability, even in neighboring regions beyond the border, is liable to spread into Russia itself.

In this sense, Russia has indeed come a long way since the heydays of Soviet involvement in the Middle East. For example, since

Gorbachev's term as president, despite entreaties from Syria, Moscow has consistently refused any attempt to change the balance of military forces between Israel and Syria and has focused on strengthening Syria's defensive capability, rather than building its offensive capability.[31] As far as is known, Moscow did not alter this attitude even during President Asad's visit last August. In other words, Moscow believes that high intensity in the Arab-Israeli conflict is not in its interest. For this reason, Russia's inclusion in the Quartet, which authored the Roadmap for an Israeli-Palestinian settlement, is consistent with Moscow's Middle East policy and lends Russia what it has always wanted: international recognition of its status as a power in the region. At the same time, such participation did not prevent Russia from strongly opposing the American military incursion into Iraq five years ago, which it regarded as fortifying American supremacy in the region and in the international theater in general. Beyond this, Russian policy also differs from previous Soviet policy, since the absence of the Communist ideology that characterized Moscow's policy during the entire Cold War has generated new opportunities for expanding commercial ties with other countries in the Persian Gulf (in addition to Iraq and Kuwait) in weapons sales and development of trade and energy cooperation.

Furthermore, one of the factors with the greatest impact on Russia's policy in this region that has completely changed since the Soviet period is the question of Islam. From a secondary constraint, it has become a key policy consideration from an internal and unquestionably from an external Russian standpoint. Given their extremely high fertility rate, the Muslim minorities in Russia are expected to account for 42.4 percent of the population in 2050, compared with 46.4 percent ethnic Russians.[32] This numerical increase joins the issue of growing attraction among these minorities to fundamentalist religion. The current Russian leadership is well aware of the problems posed by this internal Russian situation as well as the considerable status enjoyed by the Muslim countries in the international sphere, and thus the challenges posed by these minorities have become an issue in Moscow's international relations. For example, Saudi Arabia was the external party that proffered the most financial aid to the Chechen rebels, and the most severe critic of the Russian military's operations in the Caucasus. At the same time, Riyadh supported Russia's request for observer status

in the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC). Thus Moscow is very interested in its connection with this organization and attaches great importance to positions in the internal and external Muslim world regarding its policies towards the Middle East, Israel, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and other regional issues.

The most perplexing Russian position regarding the Middle East concerns the Iranian nuclear project. On the one hand, there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of the alarms sounded by Russian leaders regarding the prospect of Iran obtaining nuclear weapons.[33] On the other hand, the volume of Russia's trade with Iran, which includes both weapons sales and other economic deals and extends to official and private commercial involvement in parts of Tehran's atom project, is significant. It is obvious that Russia faces a serious dilemma here. It is anxious about a nuclear Iran, but at the same time and to the same degree, it is truly anxious about a unilateral American (or Israeli) attack on nuclear facilities in Iran. Given its inability to choose between the two options, and probably also on the basis of an intelligence evaluation that the point of no return for the Iranian project is not overly imminent, Russian policymakers have chosen not to decide. They are dragging their feet on the issue of stiffening the UN Security Council's sanctions, out of concern that this direction will eventually generate momentum for unilateral American action. They are thereby avoiding dealing with the need for effective preventative measures. It appears that the Russian position on this issue is replete with embarrassment and indecision.

Notes

The author thanks Nehamia Burgin for his help in collecting the data for this essay.

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